Revisiting Museums of Influence

Four Decades of Innovation and Public Quality in European Museums

Edited by
Mark O'Neill, Jette Sandahl and Marlen Mouliou

ROUTLEDGE

REVISITING MUSEUMS OF INFLUENCE

Revisiting Museums of Influence presents 50 portraits of a range of European museums that have made striking innovations in public quality over the past 40 years. In so doing, the book demonstrates that excellence can be found in museums no matter their subject matter, scale, or source of funding.

Written by leading professionals in the field of museology, who have acted as judges for the European Museum of the Year Award, the portraits describe museums that had, or should have had, an influence on other museums around the world. The portraits aim to capture the moment when this potential was identified, and the introduction will locate the institutions in the wider history of museums in Europe over the period, as well as drawing out common themes of change and innovation that unite the portraits.

Providing many very diverse portraits, *Revisiting Museums of Influence* captures the immense capacity of the museum to respond to changing societal needs. As a result, the book will be essential reading for students of museology and museum professionals around the world in shaping the museums they wish to create. Scholars and students of art history, archaeology, ethnography, anthropology, cultural and visual studies, architecture, memory studies and history will also find much to interest them.

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To the EMYA community

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PART 1

Introduction

Mark O'Neill, Jette Sandahl and Marlen Mouliou

'The museum refuses to stand still' declared Kenneth Hudson (1916–1999), who founded the European Museum of the Year Award (EMYA) in 1977 (Hudson 2015, p. 136). The image he conjures up is of a dynamic, even restless, institution, not simply changing, but actively rejecting pressures to remain static. The purpose of the award was – and is – to recognise successful change, to celebrate new or renewed museums that have been exceptional in terms of innovation and quality. Nearly 1,900 museums from 44 countries have applied for the award in the 42 years of its existence. This book presents 50 portraits of 51 of these museums (41 is a double portrait – portraits are referred to by number in brackets). The portraits are all written by past and current members of the EMYA jury, who were asked to propose museums that they found especially memorable – not limiting themselves to candidates that had won the main, or indeed any, prize. In reducing their c.200 proposals to the final number, the editors have given some attention to the range of museum types, their geographical spread and the involvement of different generations of judges, but the key criterion was that, after many decades of working in, visiting and assessing museums, these were the ones the authors wished to write about.

The process of selection reflects the nature of the European Museum of the Year Award. There are extensive guidelines for both candidates and judges, and every year the jury has to negotiate and agree which museums are most deserving of recognition. This book aims to capture some of the tacit, intellectual capital generated by the jury process as well as evoking the specific qualities of particular, memorable museums. The EMYA approach is highly critical, and based on a holistic experience of visiting and understanding each museum. As in a jury meeting, the authors come from a wide range of cultures and museum traditions and bring a great variety of intellectual backgrounds, experience, and theoretical perspectives to the conversation, as they champion museums that

have impressed them. Some of the institutions portrayed have already proven to be museums of influence. For others it may be too soon to say. The judges identified them as having this potential and, while there is no concluding vote on their merits, the editors hope that insights will emerge from this diversity about the somewhat elusive and changing nature of museums, about how they innovate and how ideas of quality develop.

The book is organised as follows. This introduction is in four sections. The first outlines Hudson's concept of 'public quality' in the broad context of museum history, and offers some definitions of innovation and how these relate to EMYA's understanding of the role of museums in society. It then explores some ways of reading the museum portraits that are at the heart of the book. Section III provides background on the history and development of EMYA and on the functioning of the awards. Section IV is a sketch of the broad context of change in the world of European museums in which the awards operate and offers some concluding reflections. The museum portraits are presented in the order of their participation in EMYA. They are followed by a list of all awards from 1977 to 2019.

I

Museum revolutions and progressive traditions

EMYA was part of a major change in museums, variously described as 'revolutions' or 'paradigm shifts', which became evident in the 1970s (Hudson 1981, Anderson 2004, Knell et al. 2007). A core dimension of this process of change in museums was later summarised by Stephen Weil in his often-quoted dictum as 'from being *about* something to being f*or* someone' (Weil 1999, p. 229, original emphasis). The mode of museum which was being challenged was a 'traditional' ideal of a public museum which emerged in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and which gave priority to collection, preservation and research over exhibition and education as the 'core' functions of museums (Abt 2006, p. 132). This shorthand history is only partly true – many early museums had great ambitions for engaging with and educating a very wide public. What now seems 'traditional' is often a later evolution which happened after the initial exuberant expression of a social purpose faded, and professionalisation and bureaucratisation took over. The first public museums, whether founded by Enlightened despots or emerging democratic national or city governments, represented a belief in Progress, with all that implies about changing the present to achieve a better future. Even though our relationship with ideas of progress have become, to say the least, complicated, finding a meaningful definition of progress is inherent not only in the idea of innovation, but in that of the museum itself. Thus, there is a tension, dating back to the first generations of the modern public museum, between the view that museums exist to meet the needs – cultural, educational, intellectual, economic, spiritual, political – of society, and the view that the professional tasks and processes of museums are purposes in themselves. There has indeed been a determined effort to change the status quo from the 1970s – but there are traditions of radicalism as

well as of conservatism in museum history. The word 'revolution' may be accurate in its older sense of a return to a former state, and the 'new paradigm' may be a modernisation of founding values.

There was also a political dimension to the nineteenth century model which was being challenged. Insofar as museums constituted something akin to the official biography of their society, their job was to flatter the identity of the dominant group, showing its members to be civilised, artistic, rational, unified, brave, creative, just in their victories and noble in their defeats. Even in the most inclusive nineteenth century museums, the group whose identity was privileged in this way was that of the bourgeois elite, whose assumptions about cultural, national, imperial, racial and gender hierarchies permeated every aspect of museum culture. While the processes of democratisation – in which museums have played a role – have eroded many of these assumptions, museums work within the taxonomic and institutional legacies of these worldviews, and easily slip into majority consensus narratives. These tend to present frictionless progress, to show deference to aristocratic elites of the past and to represent the achievement of modern democracy and human rights in ways that minimise the agency of the oppressed and the resistance from the powerful (Horne 1984).

What are museums for? The paradox of 'public quality'

The apparently paradoxical phrase 'public quality' was coined by Kenneth Hudson to encapsulate the criteria which the European Museum of the Year Awards would apply in assessing museums. It aims to transcend the assumption that consciously serving a public is in tension with stewardship of collections and ambitions for excellence. He defined 'public quality' as excellence across the whole range of the 'museum package': the collections; the architecture; the presentation and interpretation of the material on display; research publications and the shop; the educational programmes; activities other than those that are deliberately and obviously educational; publicity and marketing; management; attention to the physical comfort of visitors; the general atmosphere of the museum; and a 'somewhat elusive but important quality that goes under the head of "ideas, imagination"' (Hudson 1986, p. 22). In 1977 Hudson had argued that 'museums are no longer considered to be merely storehouses or agents for the preservation of a country's cultural and natural heritage, but powerful instruments of 'education in the broadest sense', and that 'what a museum is attempting to achieve has become much more important than what it is' (Hudson 1977, p. 1). Museums are both about something and for someone, unified by an active sense of purpose.

Progress: invention, innovation, and imitation

The high value placed on innovation in the past 60 years arises from its prevalence in economic thinking, especially about technological change (Godin 2012). A distinction is often made between invention, innovation, and imitation.

Invention involves the creation of a new process or product (such as, for example, the first diorama, interactive or mental health programme). Innovation involves the application of the invention in the market, i.e. their deployment systematically and at scale to reach an audience. And imitation involves learning from these early adopters, without additional innovation. In museums, innovation in three domains – 'business management, technology and value creation' – has been shown to enhance 'economic, market and social performance' (Camarero et al. 2011, p. 262). Other recent interpretations of innovative museums frame them as social enterprises, driven by entrepreneurial vision and leadership, and prioritising social benefits (Eid 2019). Throughout the portraits, it is apparent that effective social innovation combined with intellectual innovation and technological and practical skill leads to enhanced 'value creation'.

Invention, innovation and imitation are not inherently linked – invention can take place without innovation; imitation can take place without innovation. Museums that aspire to share the status of the most prestigious 'traditional' museums can imitate them and be renewed without making any innovation. Others, less encumbered by the weight of prestige, find new ways of doing things (Camarero et al. 2011, p. 262). The essays in this book give a hint at the richness of the, as yet, unwritten history of the pathways through which museums learn from each other's inventions and innovations.

Beyond best practice: meeting a social need

In his 1987 book, *Museums of Influence*, Hudson identified 37 museums that were paradigmatic, shaped by a strong societal purpose and shaping the future of museums, often through defining a particular genre – the art museum, the natural history museum, the science museum – and the museum profession itself. They achieved and went further than 'public quality'. Each had done more than 'broken new ground in such an original or striking way that other museums have felt disposed or compelled to follow their example'; instead, by its very 'existence, its approach and its style, (it) has met a real social need' (Hudson 1987, p. vii).

II

Memorability

The brief for the portraits in this book did not include a definition of 'memorable' – it simply implied museums that remained in the authors' minds years or decades after their visit. In keeping with the idea of the 'museum package', the portraits offer holistic accounts of museum visits, where memorability has resulted from a high degree of coherence, from an alignment of vision with implementation. Words like clear/clarity and integrated/integral, seamless and unity re-occur throughout the portraits. It is here that the boundaries between the interior world of the museum and the great world are negotiated,

and where the judge balances critique and appreciation. Many museums are described as achieving a level of mastery, elegance and coherence comparable with that of a great work of art. A few examples will make the point. The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (2) achieves an 'extraordinary balance' of all elements of the museum package. In MARQ (19), the portrait analyses four levels of integration – the displays with the contexts in which archaeologists work, the past with the present, the exhibition with other archaeological sites, and all the public facilities working together seamlessly. The Baksi Museum (32) 'joins the historic with the present, the social with the educational, the financial with the cultural, and merges the creative processes with the goals and methods of cultural democracy'. Where this level of congruence is achieved, the result, as in Rijksmuseum Boerhaave (50), is 'total absorption, to be carried away in time and space to places real and imagined, followed by a yearning to return'. What follows tries to tease out some of the dimensions of this level of coherence.

Collections

All the portraits celebrate the endless variety and wonder of things. From being rendered speechless by the sight of the Vasa (10) to being enchanted by the sculptures and their placing in the galleries and gardens of the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art (2), from being moved by the bullet-riddled jacket of a Solidarity activist (39) to the 'profound aesthetic experience' and insights afforded by the Rijksmuseum (34), the authors' attention is compelled by objects throughout these portraits.

Some portraits discuss how judges assess the collections as part of the overall package – do traditionally prestigious, magnificent collections have an advantage over museums who have more everyday objects? In the Chester Beatty Library (17), the magnificent collection of religious manuscripts and art was 'more than just one of the factors for giving the institution an award' – but it was combined with a 'revolution' in presentation that made it an exceptionally welcoming museum of world cultures. In assessing the British Galleries of the Victoria and Albert Museum (18) 'it was inevitable that the uniqueness or the beauty of pieces on show were a plus', but over the years 'many museums with formidable collections did not attract a positive response from the judges; on the contrary, the jury rewarded museums showing a fresh approach to the interpretation of collections which were frequently not that "special"'.

Putting an object in a museum is an act of 'making special' (Dissanayake 2003). This is their key mode of 'value creation'. The transformation of the everyday – everyday objects, everyday lives – through museum making is one of the major themes running through the portraits. The accelerating museumification of an ever-wider range of objects is not a simple spreading of a process: it represents profound changes in museums, in their democratisation, in how they see their relationships with time, with their place, with their communities and with the wider world. The ways objects are collected, understood, presented, interpreted,

and re-interpreted have all been transformed as the result of a wide range of professional, technical, intellectual, social, and political developments. These forces have also transformed museums' relationships with, and understandings of, everyday people – the non-experts who share the planet with museum professionals, and who sometimes visit museums.

The increase in the scope of collections has not been the only innovation. The Conservation Centre in Liverpool (13) sought to bring the science of preserving objects from behind the scenes and open its mysteries to the public. Odderøya Museum Harbour (40) takes a different approach to conservation – and to collecting. It relies on shared/distributed ownership, and its collection is as much its network of contacts and its data as the objects it has acquired. The Museum of Broken Relationships (24) poses a very different challenge to traditional ideas of collecting, even beyond ideas of intangible heritage, representing as it does those most ephemeral yet powerful aspects of the everyday – our feelings and memories, which otherwise 'may easily get lost in the turmoil of history'. The Museum of Innocence (31) embodies another challenging paradox: its collections tell a fictional story, which rings true at every level.

The portraits also include examples of direct engagement with the turmoil of history – what has been called extreme collecting (Were and King 2014). The *Tampere 1918* – Museum of Finnish Civil War (25) recounts how, during the conflict, a curator of the Häme Museum Society went out into the streets and collected items left after the battles. In the Solidarity Movement (39) opposition to Soviet rule in the 1980s, the activists were acutely aware of the significance of their actions, and documented their activities and their context, secreting material to ensure its survival during periods of intensified repression.

As museums in Europe struggle to rethink their relationship with non-European collections and cultures, it is interesting that Hudson's *Museums of Influence* did not feature a paradigmatic museum of ethnography, despite the existence of 'very large and therefore, in professional museum jargon, "important" institutions'. This is because 'none that I have yet seen or heard of contrives to communicate the essential features of the societies with which the museum or the collection is concerned'. 'Ethnographic museums may collect widely but they do not dig deeply. The political consequences of doing so would be too serious, or so it is felt' (Hudson 1987, p. vii/viii). These profound dilemmas and marked political consequences still prevail as ethnographic museums in Europe innovate their presentations of non-European cultures and approach the processes of de-colonisation.

Signposts to ways forward may be found in a number of portraits, in which museums reframe existing collections, including ethnographic material, to create multi-disciplinary perspectives. The Museum of Confluences (46) merges ethnographic with natural history collections to create an interdisciplinary museum about humanity and nature. MuCEM (35) makes a radical change in perspective, focusing on a large geographical region, 'on cultural change and intercultural dialogue, and on the processes of migration

across borders', so that the collections express 'new meanings' meeting 'contemporary needs'. Perhaps the most radical shift, in values and in epistemology, is seen in MACTe – Mémorial ACTe, Caribbean Centre of Expressions and Memory of the Slave Trade and Slavery (43) in which the Other of the colonial racialised traditions now speaks in rich, authentic first-person voices.

The communication revolution

The 'revolution' in the presentation and interpretation of collections was a major element in the overall improvement of the museum package, a key domain where museums renegotiated their dichotomies. The traditional museum usually provided only minimal information about the objects on display, and rarely any at all on context. A seminal museum of which Kenneth Hudson used the word 'revolution' for its use of modern communication methods to interpret social and economic change was the Rüsselsheim Museum, which won the Council of Europe Prize in 1979 (Hudson 1981). Its director, in his portrait of the Stockholm Music Museum (5) in 1981, captures the excitement and impact of the new commitment to interpretation as a fully integrated element in the museum experience. Communication methods were extended to address 'the intellect, feelings and the senses' and often included a 'mix of play with education' that emerged in Science Centres like Heureka – The Finnish Science Centre (8), engaging adults as well as children. Constructivist theories of visitor agency and experiential education have given audiences a role in shaping the message, and changed the experience of museum visiting. The British Galleries of the Victoria and Albert Museum (18) in 2003 represented a significant milestone in their application on a large scale in a prestigious art museum.

Many portraits describe excellent examples of the impact of improvement in design for communication and learning and in digital communication technologies. For example, the 'extraordinary multimedia' of the Museum of the First President Boris Yeltsin (44) helps to tell an 'exciting and intriguing epic'. The two football museums, Benfica FC Museum and FC Porto Museum (41), enable a visitor with no prior knowledge of, or interest in, football to understand 'how sport could become a source of pride and endurance for large crowds of fans'. Multisensory enhancements also foster learning and memorability, as in the deafening machinery at Quarry Bank Mill (7), as does music in the Yaroslavl Art Museum (42) and the Žanis Lipke Memorial (33). The immersive experiences in the German Emigration Centre (22) give 'some small inkling of the state of mind of those leaving their own country for ever and venturing into the unknown'. In In Flanders Fields (16), the sensory onslaught is 'almost overwhelming' and in *Tampere 1918* – Museum of the Finnish Civil War (25) they prompt the visitor to ask, 'What is it like to be inside a war?'. In contrast, The Archaeological Museum of Ioannina (28) uses little or no technology, communicating through its 'elegance and intellectual clarity'.

What all the examples, indeed all the portraits, have in common is not praise for impressive design or novelty of effect *per se*, but for the way these contribute to

what the museum is attempting to achieve. Or, to quote portrait 36 on how videos and games are used to address sensitive issues in The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Museum (36), they are 'as precisely targeted as acupuncture'.

While the power of resonant, beautiful, or impressive artefacts may not have changed, two examples may epitomise the vast new technical and artistic resources available to museums. The Žanis Lipke Memorial (33) tells the story of a tiny light in the vast darkness that was the Holocaust. It unfolds with an artistry in which 'the meaning of visitors' every step and every turn has been thoroughly planned, in both the scenario and in the design of the building'. Its immersive narrative power is captured in the portrait's dramatic opening: 'It could have been a novel, but it is a museum'. The Museum of Innocence (31) is both a novel and a museum – 'The museum is not an illustration of the novel, and the novel is not an explanation of the museum'. In 'its emotional density the museum exhibits an unsurpassed mastery in letting objects and material culture disclose their metaphoric, symbolic and psychological meanings'. As with novels, museum storytelling has an immense capacity for empathy and engagement, across a huge range of ideas, emotion and human lives in every conceivable cultural context, the capacity, in short, to immerse the visitor in the entire lifeworld of another.

Museums and time: past, present and future

Museums have to work out their place in time, which means a re-evaluation of objects, which are the material embodiment of the times that eddy through the museum. The 'traditional' museum is located outside time, or assumes a simple relationship with an idealised and static past. All the museums in this collection have defined more complex temporal positions than simply offering improved displays that enable people to look back, or even than simply being more aware of the present, reflected in better visitor services. Many make dramatic shifts in their relationship with time, in how they hold time past, time present and time future in dynamic tension, using this as a rich source of innovation.

All museums offer opportunities for reflecting on the past. And, in a basic sense, museums hold important collections from the past, and many portrayed in this book are celebrated for vital tasks of rescuing or recovering material remnants. This may be the material culture of an entire economy, as at Ironbridge (1), a landmark of its kind and winner of the first EMYA. Or it may be a survival of the first industrial revolution in a rural landscape, as at Quarry Bank Mill (7), precious paintings, especially of religious art at Yaroslavl Art Museum (42), rescued in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, or 150 years of photographs that provide a myriad of personal narratives for an entire nation, as in Albania's Marubi National Museum of Photography (48). The Alta Museum (11) treasures the few objects and buildings that survived the Nazis' policy of total destruction during their occupation of Norway. New museums of everyday working life in Greece, the Peloponnesian Folklore Foundation (4), and in Italy, The Museum of Farming and Crafts (6), which opened in the early 1980s, revalued the recent past against stigma

from both time past and from time future – from those who revered antiquity in a way that implied that more recent lives and cultures were of less worth, and from a 'blind belief in progress' that dismissed tradition as worthless.

The Museum of Confluences (46) sees itself as at the confluence not just of two rivers, and of different neighbourhoods and communities of Lyon, but of past and present. The Leventis Municipal Museum of Nicosia (9) makes the distant past more accessible by taking the 'genealogical approach', starting with the familiar present and working backwards to prehistory, increasing the likelihood of taking their sense of human empathy with them as the cultures they encounter become more remote. The Museum of the First President of Russia Boris Yeltsin (44) combines the epic eventful narrative of its eponymous hero and his times with a gallery where time 'freezes' to communicate permanent values of democracy and human rights, offering timeless ideals to inspire society. The Baksi Museum (32) is a crucible where tradition and modernity are fused and refashioned, to create an inspiring vision of the future.

The reuse of old buildings is also an act of defiance of time. La Piscine (20) transformed a beautiful and much-loved public bathhouse and swimming pool, which was about to be demolished, into an art museum. MARQ, the Archaeological Museum of Alicante (19), not only found a purpose for a redundant 1920s hospital building, but enhanced its new life by linking it with important sites across the region.

Reconfiguring the museum's relationship with time is also apparent in those which have innovated by eroding the distinction between temporary exhibitions and 'permanent' displays which are designed to last for perhaps 20 years, but usually last for much longer, due to the difficulty of securing the resources – and doing the thinking – required to change. Implicit in the term 'permanent' is a fantasy of not just the displays, but the knowledge they embody being somehow eternal. As the 'permanent' galleries become increasingly dated, in the face of new research and public interests, they are supplemented with temporary exhibitions with an increasingly different epistemology, often not only telling a story but one which has a clear author and a point of view. Some museums, including the Dutch National Maritime Museum (30), have devised, in addition to temporary exhibitions, a rota of medium term (two- to three-year) exhibitions, which means that over time, the displays can be renewed in phases, responding to public interests and new research. While this approach requires practical innovation, it is only possible through a shift in the museum's view of time and innovations in epistemology, in the processes of creating and communicating knowledge.

Time for healing

Within the overall narrative of Progress, museums have long helped societies with what might be called 'transitional therapy' – dealing with the losses brought about by rapid social and economic change, most often through preserving relics of ways of life which were being superseded. Thus, the first open